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ABSTRACT

Located along the U.S. Mexico border, colonias are unincorporated areas with no building codes, city taxes, or infrastructure. Most colonia residents live in poverty. Involving rural colonia residents from Hildago County, Texas, in a concerted effort to solve their problems became a central focus for a task force of educational and social reformers. All agreed that a community resource center was needed where colonia residents could meet, discuss community needs, and implement strategies to improve their living conditions. Such centers provide a place for community service workshops, instruction in English and citizenship, GED classes, student tutorial and computer assistance, boys and girls club activities, federal/state health and social service clinics, and empowerment of rural citizens. The task force visited a nearby community center similar to what they envisioned and then trained colonia residents who were actively involved in their communities as group facilitators. At subsequent meetings, these facilitators helped colonia residents identify their three most important needs, select representatives for the community center, focus on community-centered planning, and feel that they each had a part to play. The facilitators were instrumental in generating community support and ownership of the project. The idea caught the imagination of many individuals, organizations, and politicians who committed funding, land, and services to the project. The task force turned decision-making power over to a board elected from colonia residents. The center has taken tangible form and is now in the architectural phase. (TD)

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NORTHWEST EDINBURG COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER: A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR COLONIA RESIDENT EMPOWERMENT

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Northwest Edinburg Community Resource Center: A Successful Model for Colonia Resident Empowerment

The Northwest Edinburg Rural Community is situated in a rural area fifteen miles north of the Texas-Mexico border in the county of Hidalgo in a region called the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. This large quadrant includes hundreds of square miles belonging to the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District with set boundaries west of Highway 281 and north of Highway 107. Many near or below poverty level residents live throughout this quadrant in neighborhoods known as *colonias*. Betts and Slottje's (1994) section entitled "The Poor in South Texas" divides *colonia* residents into four categories: (1) the elderly consisting of over sixty-five years of age (10.1%); (2) the young from new born to eighteen years of age (42%); (3) the working adults; and (4) the unemployed working-age adults. The largest of the four cited groups are the children. Most are American citizens even though their parents may not be and are the most likely to remain in poverty for the rest of their lives. Social and educational reforms need to be implemented if the poverty cycle is to be broken.

Paulo Freire's (1970) early experiences with the poor and/or the dispossessed led him to describe them as the "culture of silence." Maintenance of this status quo between the haves and the have nots was perpetuated in his native Brazil by the established educational system. Not until the dispossessed begin to pursue an organized approach will they ever gain confidence in their own ability to become reflective participants in their struggle to liberate themselves from the hopelessness of poverty. Richard Shuall (1970) says it best when he states:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 16)

Involving rural residents from the Northwest Edinburg Quadrant in a concerted effort to confront and solve the many problems faced by *colonias* became a central focus for a select group of educational and social reformers. A multi-disciplinary task force was formed and all agreed that rural communities located in northwest rural Edinburg needed an access-friendly facility where colonia residents could meet; reflect on their

community needs, develop an action plan to transforming their *colonias* into vibrant living environments, and implement strategies to improve their living conditions.

Colonia Residents

A primary reason for low socioeconomic Latino family units to gravitate towards rural communities known as *colonias* is affordable housing. This allows them to make a low down payment on an unincorporated *colonia* lot without having to worry about meeting city building codes or paying city taxes. Many times these communities are situated in low flood plains and lack an infrastructure. Roads are either unpaved or covered with *caliche* (gravel), may lack electricity, safe water sources, and poor or non-existent sewage systems. Lots are usually bought with minimal down payments, which include low monthly payments for an extended time period, and property titles are awarded only when the property is paid in full.

Many of the adults living in these rural communities are employed as fieldworkers, in seasonal area jobs, and in construction in Hidalgo County and earn an annual income of $8,899 or less. Over 400,000 Texans currently live in *colonias* and

that number is expected to almost double within the next decade (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2000). Older *colonias* have had ample time for some property owners to improve their housing/lot structures and for an infrastructure to evolve. One can visually see the difference in the quality of living conditions between the residents of older *colonias* from those living in the newer ones. In some cases, *colonias* situated near the fringes of a city may eventually become incorporated, but city residents often hesitate to incorporate them due to infrastructure costs that will increase their own property taxes. The northwest Edinburg rural community area has five *colonias* within its geographical boundaries: Bar S Subdivision, La Hoehn, La Hielera or Lull, RCW, and Tierra Buena I and II. These *colonias* were identified by two school parent volunteers from RCW and Tierra Buena and a school parental involvement assistant from the Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary School. Since they had lived in these communities for over twenty years, they identified *La Hielera Colonia* as the oldest, with a projected one thousand inhabitants, as being about twenty-five years old and La Hoehn Colonia as the newest, between ten to twelve years old, populated by three to four hundred projected inhabitants. La Hoehn Colonia is less than two miles west of the

Zavala campus and its children must walk to school (Patino, Balderas, & Pena, 2001). Using the Zavala Elementary School as a central point within the Northwest Edinburg Rural Community, all five colonias are located either west or north of the campus. A close visual inspection of these colonias revealed that the colonias situated furthest west or north of the school campus appeared to be less developed. Although electrical wires could be seen along the narrow paved roads leading to the *colonias*, many residents used five-gallon butane tanks for their cooking and heating needs. Two major electric producing plants have recently located in this quadrant and are within a quarter to a mile distance from the Zavala School. Most of the electrical power is being sold to cities, across state lines, and/or across international lines.

Two competing waste management company names, marked on metal and thick rubber trash bins, could be seen in a limited number of houses, but most *colonia* homes did not have any. Several home owners were seen building additions to their homes from lumber or block cement while other homes had unfinished rooms and roofs. It became apparent that they were being built over a long period of time evident by their weathered wood frames and lack of ongoing building activity. Final

completion of these structures was based on a pay as you earn basis. Some residents were living in older trailers while suddenly a home appeared out of place that was bigger and better than the rest of the homes. Most *colonia* residents had wire fences in front of their homes. The community language of choice for these colonias is Spanish and the Mexican culture is deeply ingrained in these subdivisions. Newer immigrants would most likely settle in a newer less developed and more affordable *colonia* like La Hohen. La Hohen Colonia was judged to be the least developed of the five communities and a sign could be seen advertising lots with only a one hundred dollar down payment. Such rural communities have a major impact on the educational institutions along the Texas-Mexico border. It should be noted that State Senator Eddie Lucio of Brownsville has filed legislation, Senate Bill 517 that will strengthen the authority of county governments within fifty miles from the border to regulate land development of unincorporated areas or in essence unrestricted *colonia* development. Building codes, lot sizes, electrical and plumbing standards would be some of the new regulation that would be enforced if Bill 517 is approved (McAllen Monitor, 2001).

Schools

The Northwest Edinburg Rural Community is served by five Edinburg CISD schools: Lorenzo de Zavala, Harry Truman, and Norma Linda Trevino Elementary Schools, B. L. Garza Middle School, and Edinburg North High School. Numerous American born children of resident aliens enter area schools at all grade levels, in some cases never having attended school in their parents' country of origin, which places added pressure on these educational institutions to meet the state's standards of annual criterion tests (3rd grade and above) known as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Academic stress is therefore placed on these schools to achieve positive academic scores. Four categories are annually given to state schools: low performing, acceptable, recognized, and/or exemplary level. A low performing score is considered unacceptable and an acceptable level is perceived by many as mediocre. Obviously, these rural schools face greater academic obstacles, although academic goals can be accomplished by dedicated and focused educators, including maintaining a strong parental involvement school program. Student population differences between rural community

schools serving colonias and city schools serving middle class communities are obvious.

Two distinct school concepts emerge in this scenario: (a) traditional education oriented school concept that teaches knowledge from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. with monthly parent meetings, and (b) community integrated education oriented school concept where the traditional walls disappear and school services are integrated into the surrounding community that it serves. Developing a Rural Community Resource Center to provide educational services for rural residents provides a strategic geographical center for various federal/state health services to offer clinics (vaccinations for their children, wellness awareness, diabetes, etc.) community service workshops, a place for teaching area adults English, citizenship classes, GED classes, student tutorial and computer evening assistance, a meeting place for boys and girls club activities (sports/scouts), a meeting place for rural residents to develop attainable strategies to improve their living conditions, a center to develop community leaders, and a place to empower rural citizens. By supporting this type of centers, educational leaders have discovered that a healthier child, physically and mentally, will miss less school and increase the

school's average daily attendance (ADA) funding. A more actively involved community oriented parent becomes a pro-active participant in his/her child's education. Academic scores may therefore dramatically improve by embracing the educational philosophy of concept B or the Community Integrated Education Oriented School. For a thorough understanding of community/school culture perspectives, Lynch (1997) keys on the culture of the *colonia*, the Latino/Hispanic Culture of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, and ongoing changes in school cultures in this area.

Community Resource Center (CRC) Development: Phase I

Preliminary discussions begin in October 1999 on the concept of a community resource center. On November 10, 1999 a Multi-disciplinary Service Task Force was initially formed consisting of: Mrs. Graciela V. Perez, Principal of Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary School, Mrs. Kappie Mejia, Counselor of Lorenzo de Zavala, Mr. Hilario Rincones, Director of Texas A&M University's Center for Housing and Urban Development (TAMU-CHUD), and Dr. Arthur Linskey, Psychologist for the Center for Advancement and Personal Actualization. All meetings were to be

held at the Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary School with the prime responsibility of setting up the meeting's agenda, notifying the community, and refreshments fell on the school principal, the committee's task force chair. Mr. Rincones explained that this concept had previously been implemented by TAMU-CHUD in Texas communities at Progreso, and Cameron Park- Brownsville. Expanded centers were now being located in Sebastain, San Carlos, and the northwest rural Edinburg area. Mrs. Perez was elected the Chair and Mrs. Mejia Co-Chair of this task force. The committee focused its mission on leading a quest for a community-empowered Community Resource Center (CRC) to be known as the Northwest Edinburg Community Resource Center. Rincones outlined the following developmental steps: (1) facilitate a process for community input, (2) build a community resource center, (3) facilitate services which match the assessed and expressed needs of residents, (4) design and implement an outreach component to maximize accessibility, and (5) bring in other resources which can develop and enrich community life.

On December 1, 1999, the original task force expanded its membership from the original four now to include: Dr. Ida Acuna, Director of Texas A&M university Extension Center-Edinburg,

Dr. Miguel de los Santos of the College of Education at the University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA), Mr. Gene Espinoza—PTO President of Zavala, Mrs. Mary Flores—Director of the Edinburg Boys and Girls Club, Mr. John Perez—Director of the Outreach and Prevention Programs of Edinburg, and Dr. Ricardo J. Perez—Interim Chair, Department of Health and Kinesiology at UTPA. An explanation was provided to the new members of the task force on the mission and goals of the proposed resource center. Art Linskey cited strategies proposed by The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University in its 1993 landmark publication entitled, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* which map out strategies reflective of the TAMU-CHAD CRC Program. This publication is an excellent guide to developing individual potentials in communities, mapping community assets and tapping to potential community partnerships, developing productive relationship in communities, and connecting with local entities in community building. Acuna's 1990 dissertation entitled *Quality of Life Perception Among Residents of Rural Unincorporated Subdivisions in Hidalgo, Texas* initiated the resource center's concept; she was requested to

explain the model's concept to the group. Rural residents "want a place for educational and cultural things to happen. The TAME-CHUD system responds to the residents' expressed needs for education in such areas as parenting skills, wellness nutrition, prevention and treatment of such high incident/prevalent medical disorders as such as diabetes. Permanence and continuity are considered essential factors in an effective community resource center. Discussion centered not only on expansion of the task force, but of possible grants to be written for the project. It was noted that past experiences have shown that when community centers were funded and built by external entities that thought they were helping the rural poor, they were not as successful. Residents looked at the community center as a handout and such centers were not effective. Centers, which have evolved and received strong input and support from local rural residents, were most often successful ventures. CRC buildings were often free of vandalism and graffiti, and were meeting centers of intensive community activity. Area residents consider these resource centers as focal points of their communities and pointed to them with civic pride. The task force chair recommended that the task force now begin a

personal dialogue at the next monthly meeting, with NW Edinburg residents.

A representative group of the task force consisting of the chair, co-chair, and a UTPA professor visited the Progresso CRC during a noon luncheon meeting held at that center to assess the existing community resource building in Progresso, its capacity to serve community's needs, evaluate existing services available and housed in the building, and the type of community discussions being offered. Upon arrival of the facility, we observed ample parking space and a brown brick building with gray trim next to the highway on the western side of Progresso. This small town is situated south of the city of Weslaco and a few miles north of the international bridge connecting the City of Nuevo Progresso, Mexico. Two portable wooden building were seen to the side of the building. One housed the Women, Infant, and Children Program (W.I.C.) and the other was to house computers for tutorial support to children after school and for Adult English language development. A third portable building was to be placed in the back for a HEP and GED programs. A children's playground equipment made from wooden posts were located behind the building. Several outreach services were housed in the main

building on that day and were seen providing services to local residents. A lobby area with a seating capacity for twenty, with neatly placed rows faced a receptionist's desk, was situated in the front center of the building. Men and Women's lavatories were equipped for the disabled. In a larger room labeled an auditorium, thirty individuals were listening to a speaker discuss state and federal services that were available to visually impaired community residents. We saw a mixture of local residences and service agency representatives in attendance at the luncheon meeting. No one was seen collecting luncheon monies. The speaker spoke in both Spanish and English and provided the audience with tips on how she, who was visually impaired, was able to conduct her daily home chores without assistance by using learned strategies for the blind. She guided the audience through various state agencies and the type of services they provided to the visually impaired. It was an extremely informative speech which gave us a clearer vision of what we intended to do with the NW Edinburg Resource Center. On a second visit to the Progresso Community Resource Center, they were planning a seventh year anniversary by inviting the community to a health fair. Sixteen persons were in attendance to listen to Mr. David Luna explain the

multiple services available from the Department of Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). A flyer was provided identifying the thirteen separate agencies directly under the supervision of the HHSC (i.e.; Texas Department of Human Services [TDHS], Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse [TCADA] Texas Commission for the Blind [TCB], Texas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing [TCDHH]). Mr. Luna presented a "Coordinated Interagency Service Plan" draft dated January 24, 2001 to a mix audience of human service department representatives and local residents. It was a six page well thought out draft stating: Purpose and Scope of Plan, HHS Needs Assessment, Four Service Goals, Service Plan Tasks and Activities for a twelve period for the Progresso Community Resource Center. A proposed HHS Agency schedule for *colonia* of Progresso, Cameron Park, and Sebastian was distributed to the audience. It listed services to be provided by five HHS departments to include: osteoporosis education and screening, diabetic testing, nutrition, exercise, drug and alcohol abuse, counseling services, food stamps, Medicaid eligibility, immunization, meals on wheels, adult day care, eye screening, child protective services, and family preservation. Four

promotoras were also in attendance and were all wearing maroon vests. The *promotora* concept is the employment, full-time or volunteer basis, of colonia residents who serve as liaisons between the CRC and the local community. Their objective to go out into the community and inform the residents of the services being offered through the CRC. Full-time or part-time *promotoras* are paid minimum wage by Texas A&M, Americorp, and/or VISTA. Two large vehicles were parked in front, one very large mobile truck and a large truck, bearing the letters' The University of Texas-Houston: Health Service Center and Texas A&M System Health Service Center: School of Rural Public Health. This information was reported back to the task force.

Curriculum Resource Center Development: Phase II

The task force chair invited fifteen resident leaders representative of the five colonias and other existing communities to the next meeting to be held on January 27, 2000. Rural resident selections were based on active parental school involvement, local community involvement, and recommendations from *colonia* residents who were actively involved in each communities and who would attend planned meetings. Aida Acuna placed the group

through a two and a half intensive hour training session conducted in Spanish. Many of the selected adults' English language was limited and most meetings, henceforth, were conducted entirely in Spanish. Four committees were formed consisting of four to five individuals: health services, public safety, youth programs, and education/recreational. Small group discussions followed on how best to outline the task of each committee. In following meetings, Acuna trained the attending *colonia* residents as group facilitators, which was to later become a most critical *colonia* empowerment ingredient, for a larger meeting to be held the following month. She restated her prime message that "community ownership is essential to maximum and optimum community use." The facilitators' task would be to: (a) identify the three most important needs of NW Edinburg residents within their selected group, (b) allow the facilitator's group to select one to two representatives for the community development center, (c) focus on the nature and the implementation of community-centered planning, and (d) make sure that each NW Edinburg resident feels that he/she has a part to play. Colonia trained facilitators were to play a critical role when all community residents were to be invited to upcoming meetings by distributing bilingual flyers/posters to local Spanish radio

station, rural churches, and country stores. Several other training sessions followed during the following weeks. Rincones emphasized at one of the meetings that an extended partnership with the City of Edinburg, Edinburg CISD, UTPA, TAMU, Texas Migrant Council, Hidalgo County Head Start and other agencies would strengthen a proposed grant request for the center development. At this meeting, Mr. Edward Castro, county judge representative, affirmed Hidalgo County Judge Eloy Pulido's commitment to support the project.

A packed audience of several hundred adults filled the Zavala cafeteria at the following February NW Edinburg Community Development Center meeting. Northwest Edinburg quadrant residents were well represented and the *colonia* facilitators were given black markers, white butcher paper, and masking tape to record their group's community priorities. Different members of the task force addressed the audience on the purposed objectives of the CRC and requested their input. The area residents were divided into groups of ten to discuss community needs and rank priorities while the original members of the task force, mostly professionals, observed and approached a group only to clarify their questions. Area needs assessment discussions had to

come from each of the ten groups identifying community issues. They were requested to identify at least ten issues, but to rank only three according to their priority of need based on their group's vote. After much deliberation, a group leader was selected to report to the whole group. The question asked of them was "Considering the next 3-5 years, what are the critical things that will be needed to realize the future for yourself, your family, and your community? *(¿Considerando los proximos 3-5 años, cuales son los asuntos o precupaciones criticos que se debérian considerar para que usted pueda realizar el futuro que usted desea para si mismo, su familia, y su communidad?*) Their tabulations were turned over to the committee task force chair that assessed their scores based on rank order frequency tabulation. This tabulation count took several days and scores were later reported at the April 4, 2000 meeting. Prior to leaving, two area residents from each of the ten discussion groups were selected to serve on the NW Edinburg Community Development Center. Selected residents beamed with civic pride at having been selected by their neighbors to serve on this important committee.

At the next monthly meeting, the following tabulations were reported:

RECORDED TABULATIONS OF COLONIA RESIDENTS

Assessed Ural Resident Needs	Score
Community Health Clinic	33
Multipurpose Community Center to accommodate boys/girls club, adult education, psychosocial skills training, student tutoring/mentoring, family counseling & psychotherapy, Head Start Program, day activity center for seniors and the disabled, recreational activities, community meetings	25
Community Parks	20
Police Sub-Station	16
Volunteer Fire Department	14
Safety and Community Grooming Needs to include: community safety & beautification, sidewalks, paved streets	13
Access to the Center and its Services	12

Community Resource Center Development: Phase III

More non-area resident individuals interested in the NW Edinburg Development Center were in attendance at the April 4, 2000 monthly meeting. The following were in attendance: representatives from the central administrative office of the Edinburg CISD, school board candidates, Hidalgo County Commissioner Representative, boys/girls club director, newspaper reporters, six licensed professional counselor interns, eight

graduate students from UTPA's master's program in counseling, eight doctoral UTPA students, and seventy-five Northwest Edinburg residents. The idea had now caught the imagination of many individuals. Other support would come throughout the 2000-2001 year in form of impressive letters of support from multiple entities. TAMU-CHUD offered to donate a van to the center to help individuals needing transportation to town to seek medical help or simply to cash their monthly checks, but some other entity had to maintain the cost of operating the van. The main issue now remaining was finding the financial capital to purchase a centrally located building site for the center and the funds needed to construct a Community Resource Center building.

Precinct 4 Hidalgo County Commissioner Oscar Garza, Jr. played a pivotal role in helping to address the land and building construction issue. The very personable commissioner attended several monthly meetings in late spring and in the fall. He told the audience that he was elected to serve the rural community and would do everything within his power to help and support the NW Edinburg Community Resource Center. By fall, 2000, he had a verbal commitment from an anonymous citizen to donate one acre of land on North 10th and Rogers Road west of the Zavala campus.

The donated acreage's location was centrally located in Edinburg's Northwest Quadrant. Additional funds of $85,000.00 were now available to help begin the construction phase of the building to be further supported by other grant foundation funds. In addition, the new Edinburg CISD superintendent supported the ideas of allowing the NW Edinburg Resource Center to be housed in one of the portable buildings on the Zavala campus during the construction period of the CRC building. Acuna reported to an executive board meeting on February 2, 2001 that she would have community training sessions on nutrition and sewing for area residents. Mr. David Luna, special assistant for Border Affairs of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, stated at the meeting that he would extend the community resource center concept to Laredo, Eagle Pass, and El Paso. A newly hired Edinburg CISD was also introduced at the meeting who would be writing a 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program (CFDA No. 84.287) competitive grant to the U. S. Department of Education. Closing date for submittal of competitive grant is March 30, 200 and four hundred grants are expected to be awarded to inner-city and rural schools that are working with a community

organization to expand educational opportunities to both children and adults.

By February 2001, the task force had begun to turn the decision making powers over to the newly elected executive board consisting of northwest area residents. Local residents had elected Mirta de la Fuente as president, Noemi Santibanez as vice president, Clemente Gutierrez as secretary, Patricia Tenoria as treasurer, and Arnulfo Villarreal as parliamentarian. The new executive board members reside in the Bar S Subdivision, La Hielera Colonia, and the northwest Edinburg quadrant. These individuals had originally been strong advocates of the concept and had attended leadership training along with other northwest residents. The Northwest Community Resource Center, once an impossible dream, has now taken tangible form and is now in the architectural phase. It will succeed because of hard-working, politically astute individuals, and caring people banded together to work cooperatively towards a common goal of rural community service. Lately, state government, state representatives/senators have inquired about taking the concept to other parts of the state that are not traditionally considered close or within a fifty mile distance from the Texas-Mexico border. In summation, the Spanish

saying of "*El querer es poder*" (loosely transformed: where there is a will, there is a way) best fits the desire of the resource center participants to achieve their goal of bringing critically needed social services to rural *colonia* residents.

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